

So, You Want to Write a Textbook?

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Abstract

For many of us, the idea of writing a textbook is appealing. But, even as we dream of the ideas we would like to convey, we aren't certain about the concrete steps in the process. Even more mystical is what happens once we turn our manuscript over to the publisher. Writing a textbook is a rewarding experience and a wonderful outlet for creativity. Writing a textbook is an opportunity to serve your profession by further disseminating knowledge in your field. Writing a textbook allows you to enjoy the challenge of translating ideas into words. Writing a textbook is also a demanding and occasionally tedious job which requires a lot of attention to detail. Writing a textbook requires commitment and passion.

What does it take to write a textbook? Attention to detail. The author and publisher must make many decisions concerning the content and style of the text. The type of material to be presented and the particular audience for the text will have a significant effect on the pedagogical details. Several excellent texts exist which describe pedagogy and learning styles. This paper discusses the traits common to all texts: content, audience and readability. The paper also provides a flow chart showing the basic steps in the process of taking a text from prospectus to publication; the process of creating, editing, and publishing a textbook for the college market from an author's point of view.

The Makings of a Good Book: Content, Audience and Readability

The overriding purpose of a textbook is to enable learning. Throughout the writing process, there are three critical components that the author and the publisher must focus on in order to create a textbook that supports learning: the audience, the content, and the readability of the text.

The Audience

Essentially, the author has two primary customers to keep in mind: the reader and the educational professional using the text. The educational professional will have a variety of reasons for selecting a particular text. These reasons will revolve around a text's

ability to strengthen the presentation of material as planned for in the course. This individual will be interested in the actual material presented, the organization of the material, the interrelationship of the topics covered, the pedagogy with which the material is presented, the ancillary teaching aids available to support the book, the suitability of the text for the time frame available (semester, quarter, year) and related areas. Since the text will serve as a source of information for the students in the course, it will need to cover the appropriate topics in the sequence needed for the course. Market studies, discussions with colleagues and reviewer comments are sources for information on what should be covered and the order in which it should be covered.

The reader, or student in the course, will be primarily concerned with the readability of the text. In other words, how easy is it for them to comprehend and apply the material presented in the text? They will also be interested in whether or not the text material has been presented in a creative and innovative format. Simply stated: is the book interesting to read? When writing a textbook, an author must possess a comprehensive command of the material he or she wishes to present to the reader. The author must also have an understanding of how readers absorb and comprehend material presented in a printed format. Authors can increase the reader's interest in the text material by adding appropriate examples and vignettes that discuss and describe the material beyond basic definitions or formulas.

Content

Determining the content, the actual material selected for the text, is not always a straightforward decision. In today's world, in all disciplines, there is an abundance of potential information and ideas available to cover. A text's content and its audience are intricately related. Many content questions are answered when the author identifies the audience. Content decisions involve determining whether the material is being presented at the introductory, intermediate or advanced level. Will the text provide an overview of a wide variety of topics or significant detail on only a few? Will the text be offered at the associate, bachelor's or graduate studies degree level? Will the text be inter-disciplinary? And so on. Authors and publishers must determine at the outset what market need is to be met, who the text is for, and what content best supports that particular market. Market research conducted at the beginning of the book creation process, as well as information provided by reviewers throughout the process will provide the author with direction for the content of the text.

Readability

Both the educational professional and the reader are interested in what the textbook can teach them. Readability enhances a text's ability to convey information. Authors must keep in mind that enabling learning is more complex than writing down concepts and ideas. A well-written, readable text will clearly identify the essential ideas while the

surrounding material provides support and enhances reader understanding. Attention must be paid to how sentences are constructed and how ideas are separated into paragraph form. Key ideas should be stated in clear, concise, succinct and focused sentences. Readers can easily lose track of key ideas in a maze of confusing or convoluted sentences. Supporting information which provides details, interpretations and interrelationships should be presented in an organized and logical manner in order to enable learning.

Keep the writing succinct. Be ruthless when editing to maintain your focus on the essential ideas. Good texts simplify the presentation of the material without a loss of meaning.

Proper pace is critical. New material must not flow at the reader in such a rate that there is no time for reflection or review. Authors need to help readers make connections by endeavoring to write explanations that draw on what the reader already knows and then work to join that information with what is new or unfamiliar.

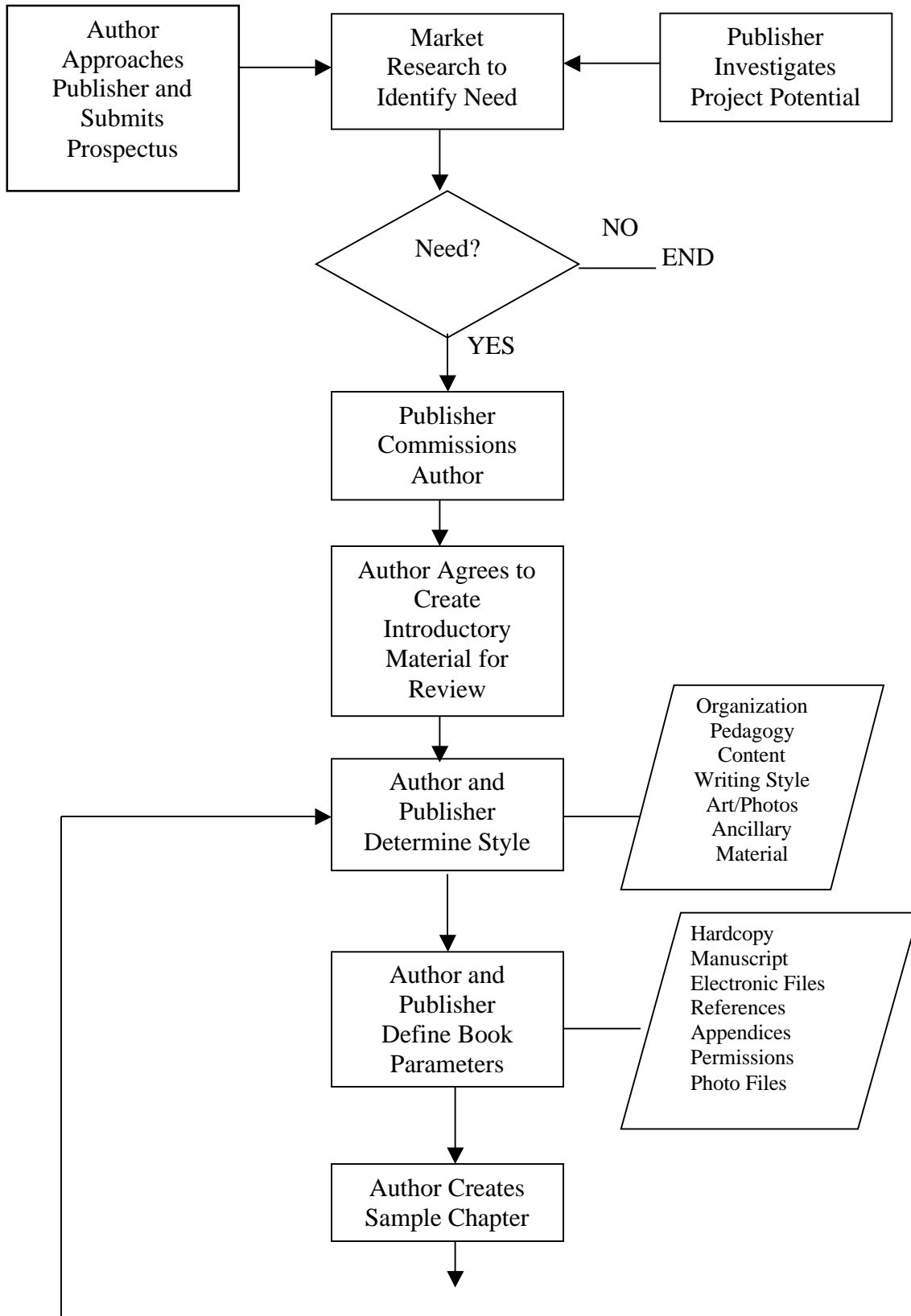
Authors can also enhance readability by keeping the tone of the text friendly and conversational. Provide concrete, real-world examples that draw on the known experiences of the readers. Include illustrations, graphs, charts, computer software, appendices, indexes, headings, summaries, chapter introductions, lists, vignettes, concluding material, margin notes, objectives and more in the text. Use these to engage the reader by finding ways to get them fascinated with the material. The elements chosen will define the style of the textbook. This style must provide the optimal support for the material. Ancillary materials also enhance learning. These materials may include instructor's manuals, test banks, videotapes, study guides, transparency packages, CD-ROMs, websites, etc.

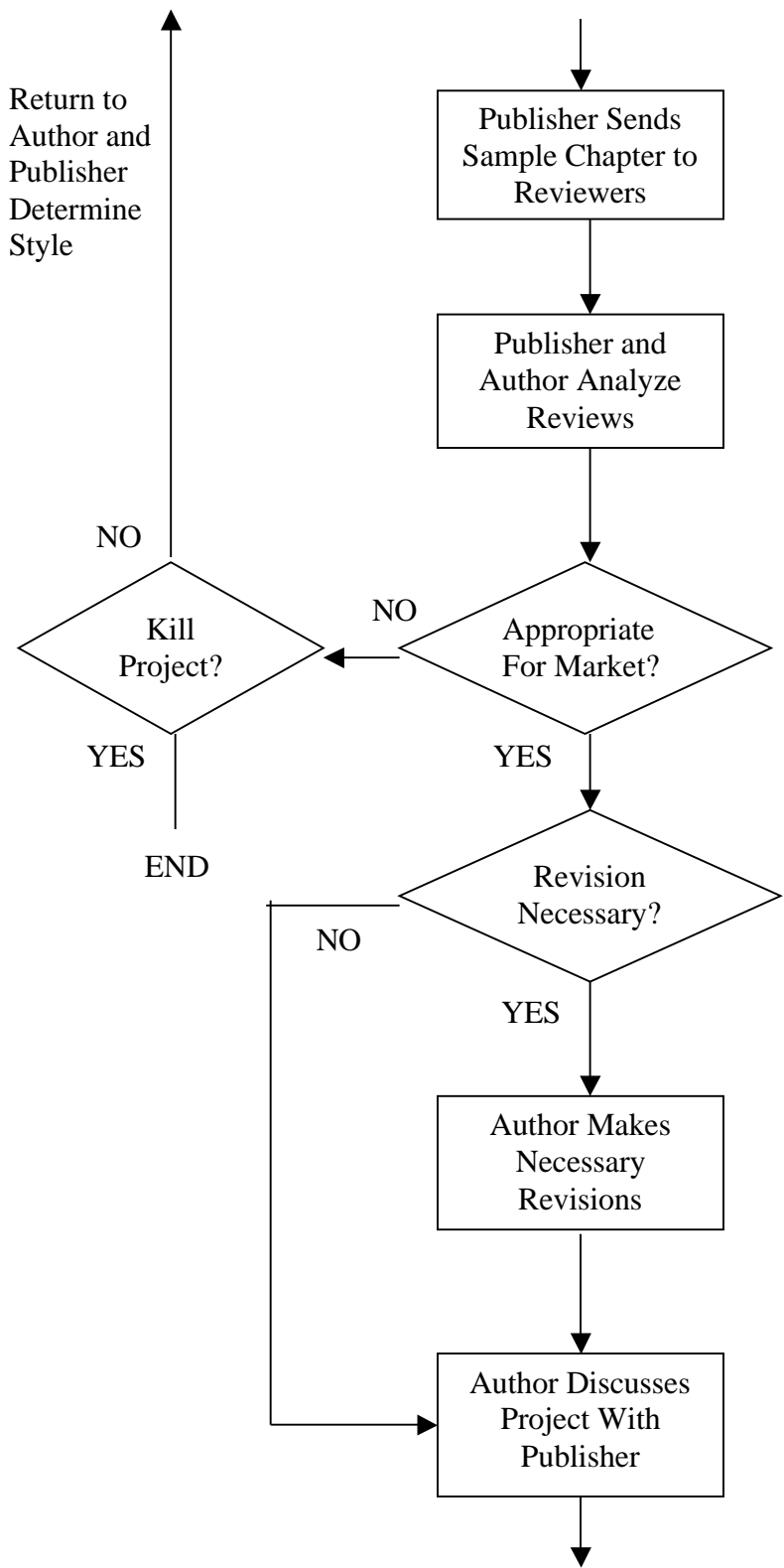
Authors of textbooks have the difficult job of putting words on paper in a coordinated manner that not only covers the necessary topical material, but also enhances reader learning. Funston describes writing a textbook as a creating a system in which all the individual parts; words, illustrations, topics, examples, thoughts and ideas, must work together to enable the reader to learn. Clearly, the writing of an effective textbook involves much more than putting words on paper, essential as this is. This writing involves making innumerable choices of content, approach, illustration, and emphasis.³

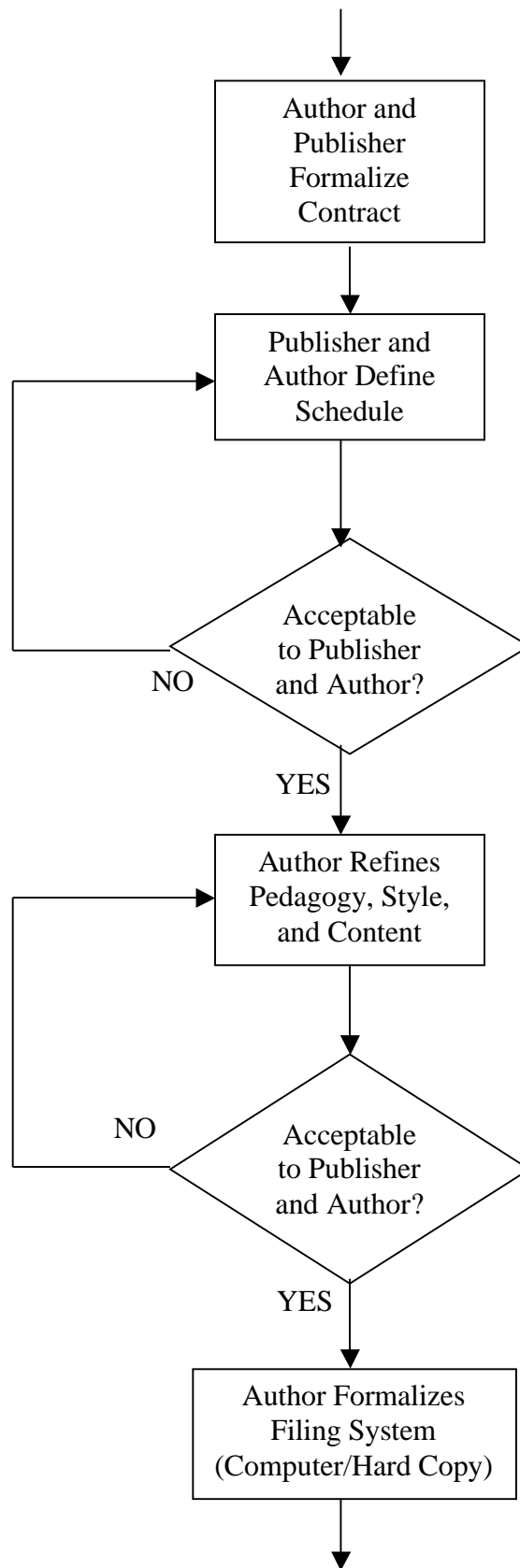
The Process of Creating a Good Book

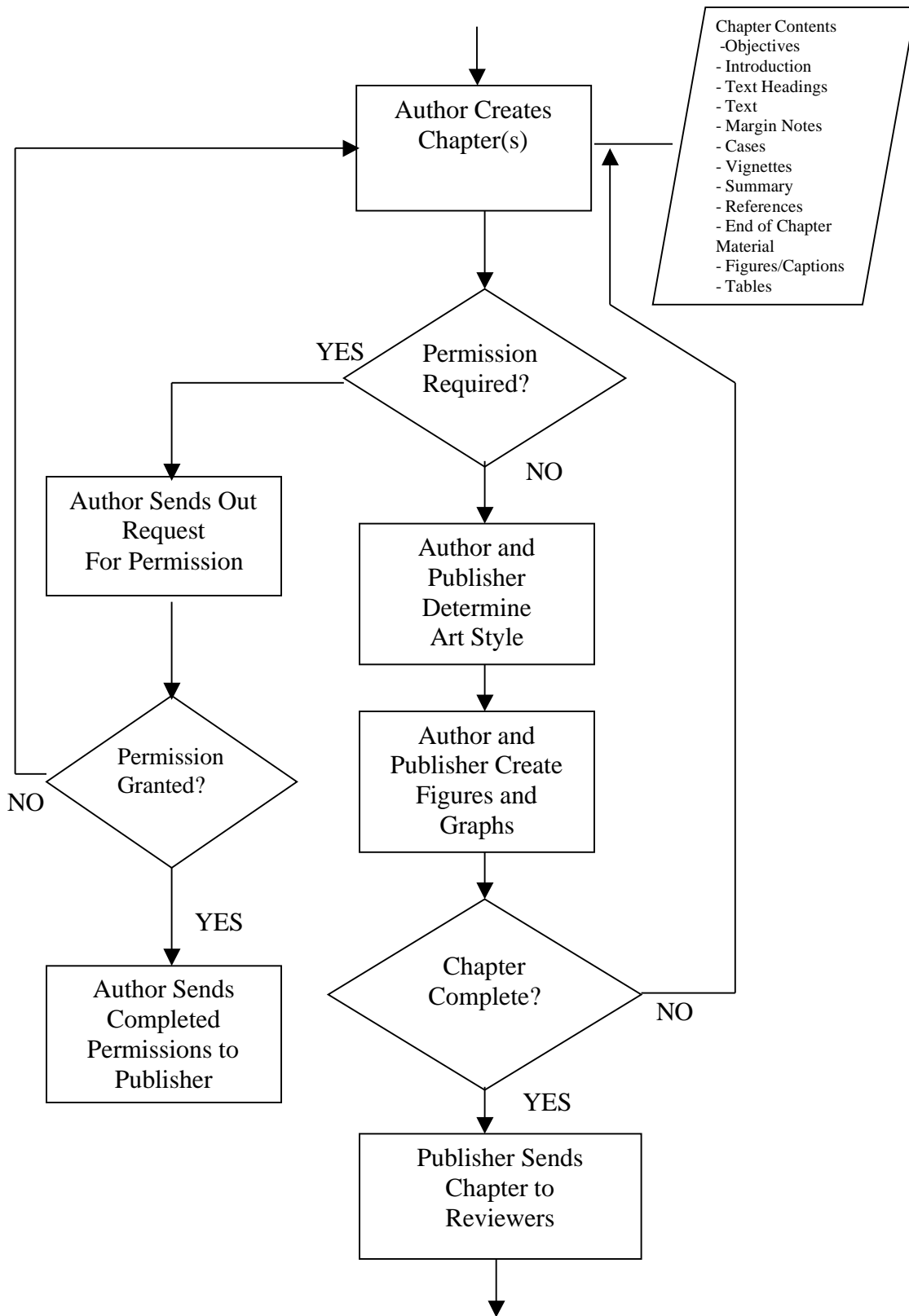
Writing a textbook is a large-scale project. Staying organized and practicing good project management skills are essential for the successful completion of a text. Understanding the flow of the actual process of physically creating a textbook can be very helpful for planning purposes. The flow chart that follows describes the major steps, from prospectus to publication, typically found in the process of creating a textbook.

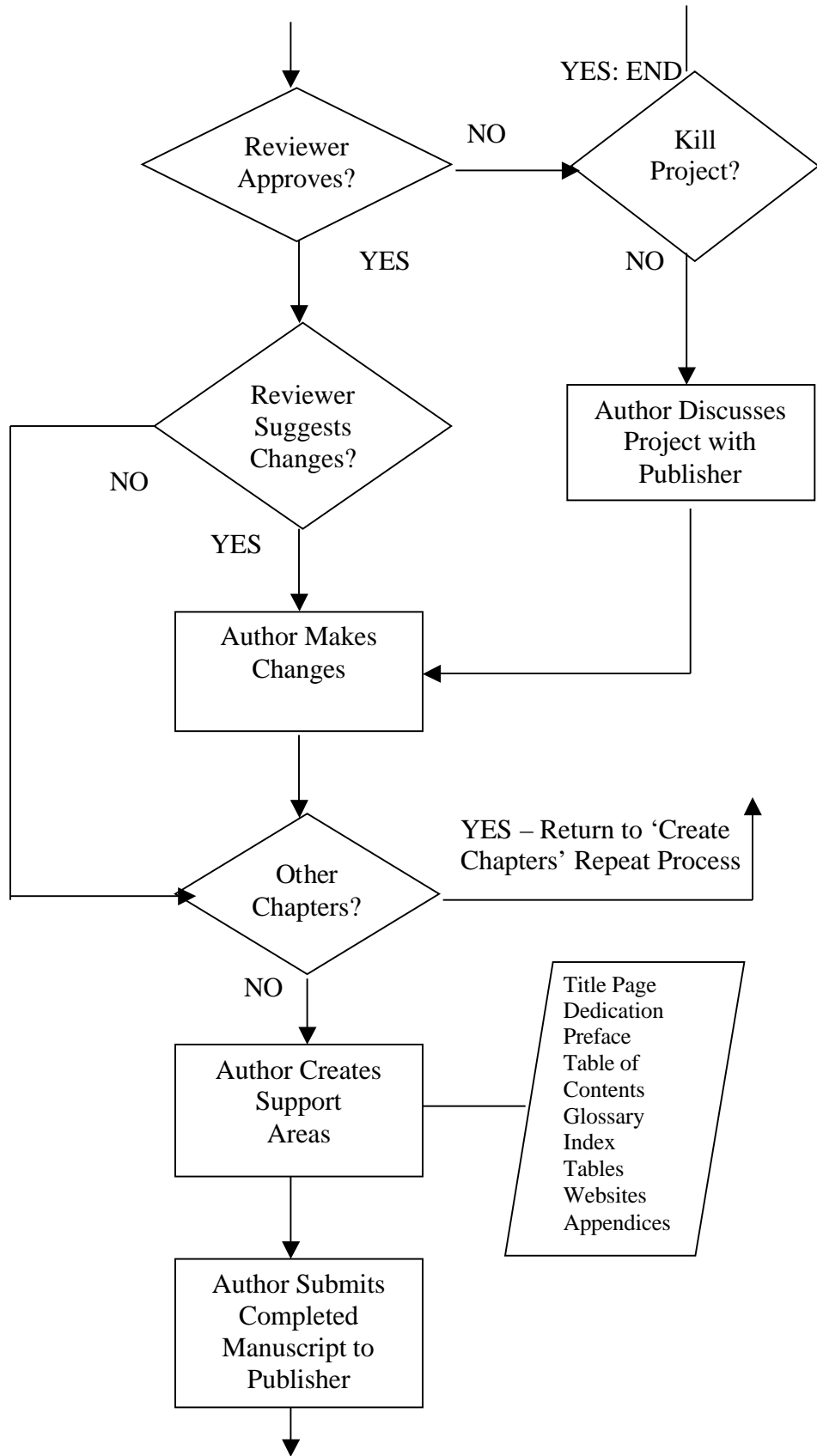
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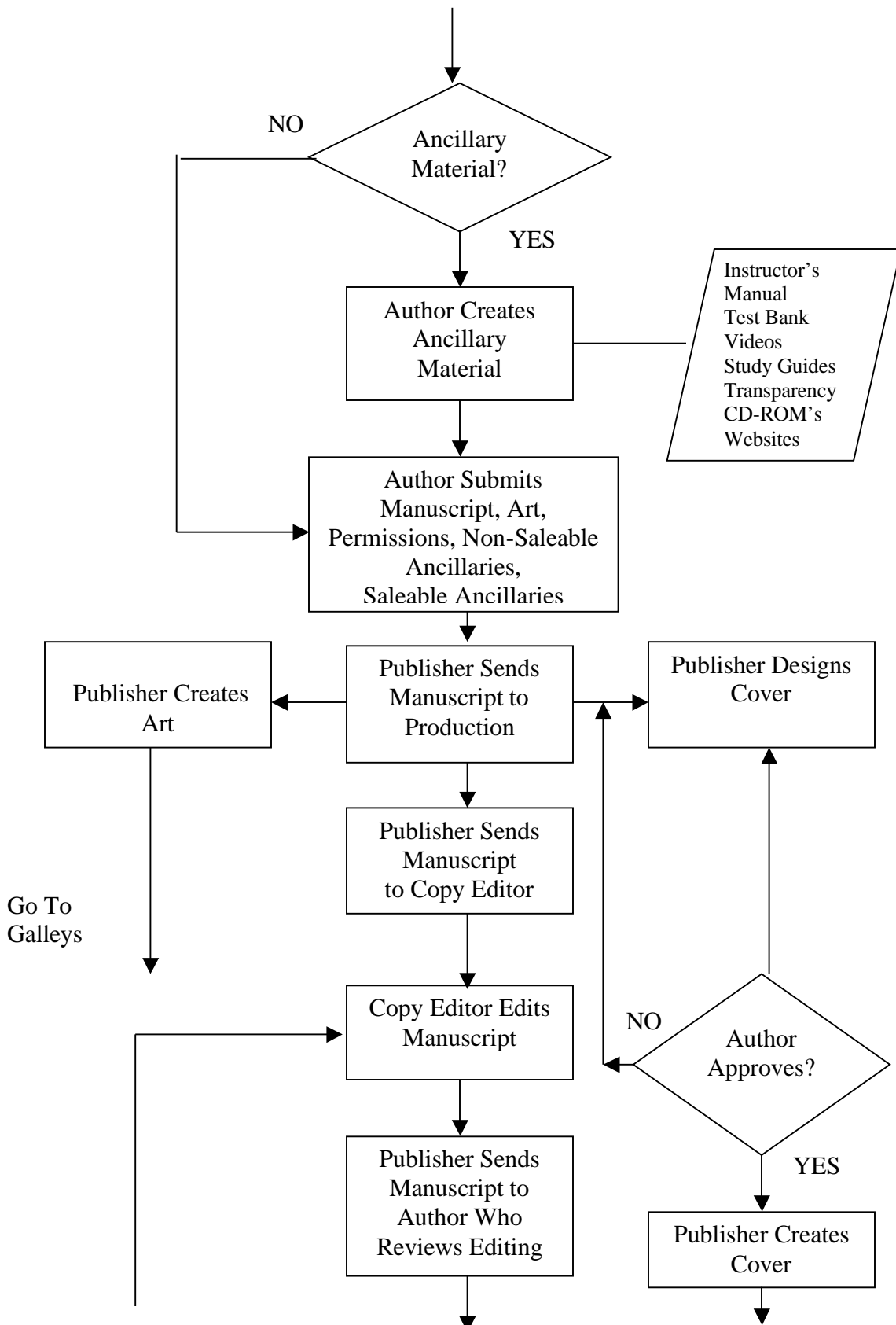


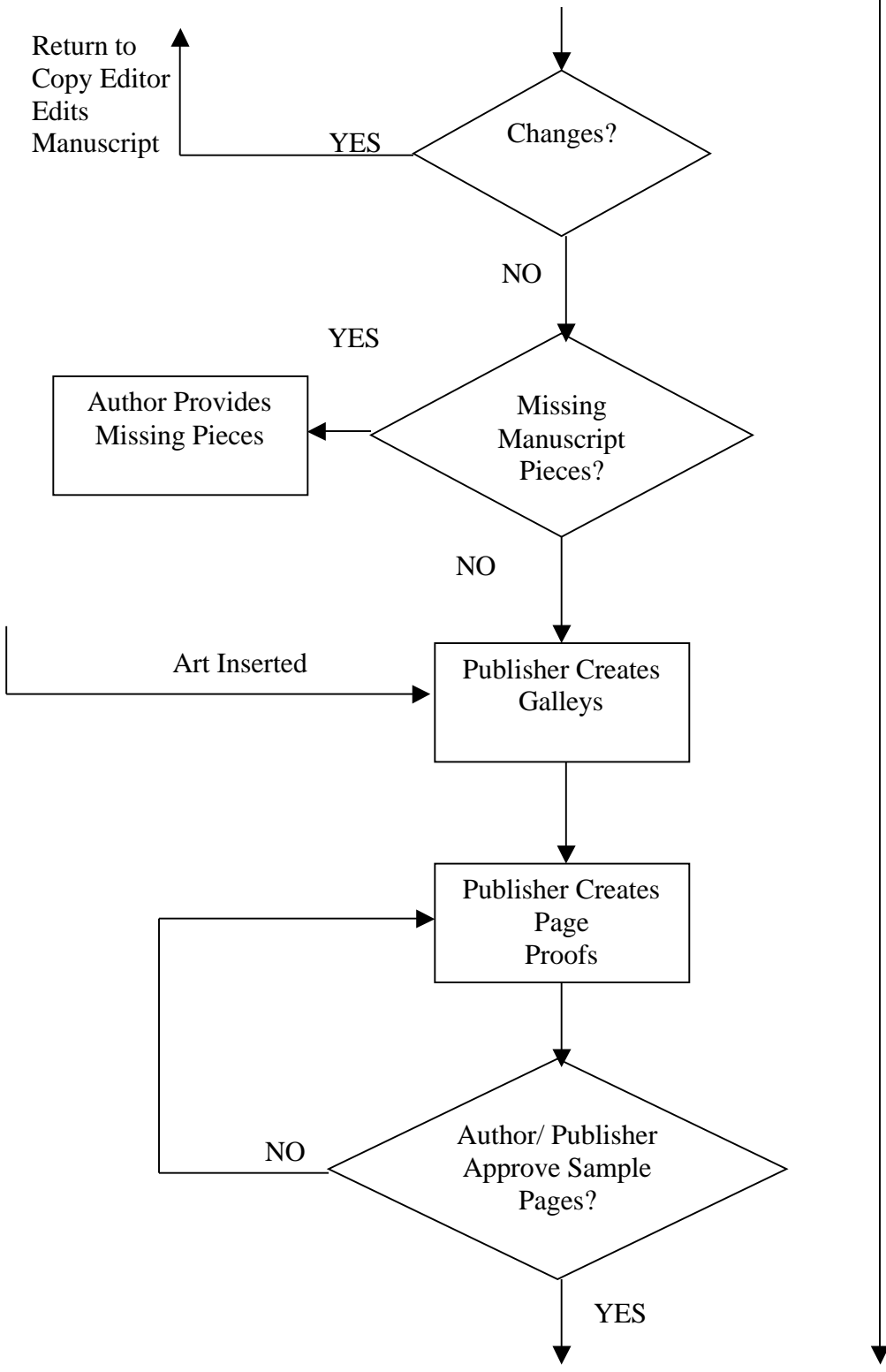


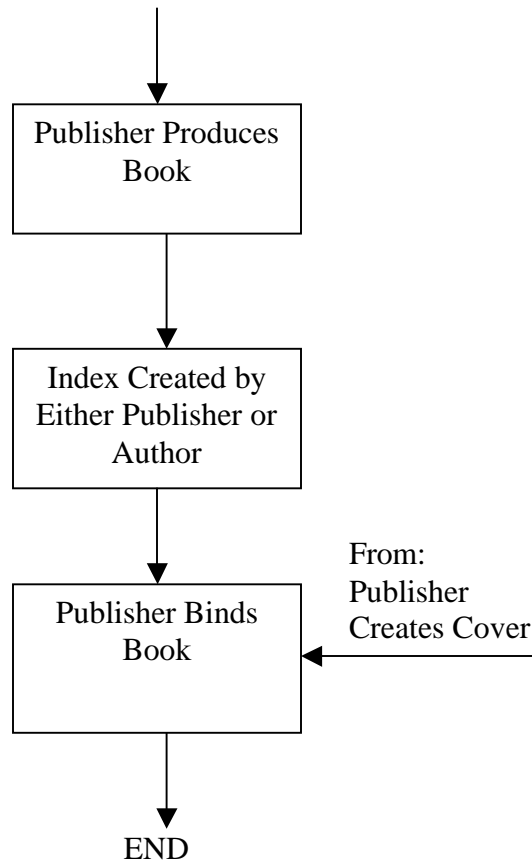












Final Thoughts on Writing a Good Book

Writing a textbook requires significant interaction between the author and the publisher. As can be seen by this flow chart, both the author and the publisher have much to do. The focus for the author will be on the creative presentation of information in order to enhance learning. For the publisher, the focus will be on managing the process of physically producing a text that meets the needs of the chosen market. Communication between the publisher and the author is vital in order to achieve both enhanced learning and marketability.

Each text will reflect its author's own particular presentation and writing styles, but every text must meet the goals of determining their appropriate audience, selecting content compatible with their target audience and presenting the material in a readable fashion. Once the target audience has been determined, it is essential to maintain a focus on them

throughout the process. Similarly, authors should decide on format and presentation style early and then be consistent throughout the text. Authors should remember to listen to their reviewers, even though at times it is difficult to accept criticism about a project that has consumed so much time and effort. The editors and reviewers are there to help, their understanding of the market is invaluable.

By following good project management principles the text can be completed in a timely manner. Authors should endeavor to get organized and stay that way. Decisions on organization and filing practices early in the process can prevent heartbreak later. Backup copies are essential. The more practical and flexible the organization system is, the more likely you will be to use it.

Writing a textbook is a labor of love. To see a large project such as this from conception to completion takes serious commitment. Without the passion to commit to a project of this magnitude many texts remain in outline form. And, in the midst of all the hard work that needs to be done, be sure to keep your sense of humor.

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Donna C.S. Summers, Ph.D. is the author of the text, *Quality*, currently in its third edition. Dr. Summers is currently working on a sequel to *Quality* entitled *Quality Management*. She has also published *PAWS, Letters of Love, Laughter and Loyalty*, an amusing non-fiction book of letters. Dr. Summers is a Professor of Engineering Technology at the University of Dayton. She holds a B.S. degree in Mechanical Engineering and a Master's Degree and Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering.